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NEWS

Winchester honors long-time moderator John J. Sullivan

NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY | STAFF WRITER

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John J. Sullivan's family sits on the newly dedicated bench in his honor next to Winchester Town Hall. Sullivan was honored for his years of service to the community during a ceremony on Oct. 23. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

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John J. Sullivan was known for his love of Winchester, spending [illegible] 37 years as the town moderator, but even longer in service to the

community and its residents.

On Oct. 23, Sullivan was honored by the town with a memorial bench and plaque, as more than 50 people came together next to Town Hall for the ceremony. Friends, family, public officials, town officials and a line of town employees quietly standing in the background all praised Sullivan for his everlasting dedication to Winchester.

“It’s just gorgeous,” said Sullivan’s niece Karen Garrett, of the site. “It’s so special because it’s in the most appropriate place, half way between Town Hall and the town center.”

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JOHN J. SULLIVAN, ESQ.
LIFELONG RESIDENT & COMMUNITY LEADER
THREE TERMS ON THE BOARD OF SELECTMEN, 1967-1976
TOWN MODERATOR FOR 37 YEARS, 1977-2014
1985 CITIZEN OF THE YEAR AWARD
JOHN LED TOWN MEETINGS CONCERNING DIFFICULT ISSUES WITH INTELLIGENCE, STRONG LEADERSHIP, AND WIT. HE WAS ALWAYS THERE TO SUPPORT TOWN WORKERS WITH COMPASSION AND FAIRNESS. WINCHESTER ALWAYS CAME FIRST.

A plaque stands in front of a bench newly dedicated to John J. Sullivan. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

Garrett said it wasn't uncommon to see her uncle walking around town, greeting friends and neighbors wherever he went. She said he w

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drop in to see her and her mother, Nan Shanahan, whenever he was in the neighborhood.

“John would always come into our office to talk,” she recalled. “He was always walking to the bank and then he’d stop by and he always had things to figure out so we’d sit and do that.”

Garrett said because her uncle died in 2021 during COVID-19, it was so hard for people who wanted to honor him, but couldn’t. She said so many people put work into getting the bench and plaque dedicated to his memory.

She added being at Wednesday’s ceremony was exciting because the dedication was finally happening.

“It’s totally that,” Garrett said. “It just looks gorgeous and it’s a gorgeous day. It’s just where it should be and it’s very special.”

Jan Foley, who worked as Sullivan’s secretary during his time at Perland in Burlington, remembered her former boss fondly. She said after working for him for eight years, when he went to law school, the two stayed in touch.

“I typed all his papers,” she said, with a laugh. “I remained friends with his sister, Nan. I’ve known her for 30 years.”

She added the site where Sullivan’s bench and plaque was as just “lovely.”

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Nan Shanahan speaks to a crowd of more than 50 people at a dedication ceremony on Oct. 23 about her brother John J. Sullivan. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

Shanahan, who spoke about her older brother with humor and love during her speech, said she was happy by the turnout.

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"It's such a good cross section of people," she said, of the crowd. "They knew what a good person he was. He helped everyone, he was a problem solver."

While Wednesday's speakers spoke of Sullivan's dedication and the years of sacrifice away from his family, Shanahan said her brother loved what he did.

"He was so devoted to the town," she said. "But he was also devoted to our mother, who was in a wheelchair later in life. He would bring her to all the town events."

She paused.

"I was in awe of him," Shanahan said, quietly. "For example, he was always studying, getting ready for Town Meeting. He spent hours and hours so he would know where he stood. He was so well prepared. I'm very proud."

Who was John Sullivan?

Sullivan was born in Winchester to Arthur and Madeline Sullivan, the second of seven children. He graduated Winchester High School in 1955 before attending Villanova University.

He was a U.S. Navy Officer of the Vietnam War, serving as Fleet Oiler Navigator (1961-1963). He was also a project engineer for the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission (1963-1966) and president of Charles T. Main (1966-1985).

At the age of 54, Sullivan switched careers and went to Boston College Law School, "allowing him to begin a new career of helping local families with estate law, practicing at Hall & Sullivan (1997-2015)," according t obituary.

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The late John J. Sullivan spent years of dedicated service to his hometown of Winchester. He was honored on Oct. 23. COURTESY PHOTO/LEGACY.COM

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Sullivan served as a three-term member of the Select Board, from 1967-76 and was town moderator for 37 years, from 1977-2014. He also ran as a candidate for lieutenant governor in 2006.

Sullivan was also chairman of Winchester Cooperative Bank, from 1986-2017.

In 1985, he was recognized by the Winchester Chamber of Commerce as its Citizen of the Year for all his service to the town.

In 2017, he retired to Florida. He passed away in 2021.

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The ceremony

Wednesday's ceremony was hosted by Winchester's current town moderator, Heather von Mering, who read a portion of the plaque dedicated to Sullivan's service.

Sen. Jason Lewis and Rep. Michael Day both presented the Sullivan family with citations from the State House. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

Peter Haley, who stepped into the town moderator's shoes following Sullivan's retirement in 2014, spoke of his friend with admiration, sharing stories showcasing Sullivan's sense of humor. He said his long-time friend would have liked Wednesday's ceremony.

"He would have appreciated this bench and memorial," Haley said. "From here, he can keep an eye on Town Hall."

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Haley said he looked forward to coming to sit on the bench and converse with Sullivan and catch him up on the goings-on in Winchester.

Select Board Chair Michelle Prior said she didn't know Sullivan as well as some of the other speakers, but added when she first joined town government, she was there to see the former town moderator in action. She said his work as a town official helped Winchester in ways that are still being felt today.

"He leaves a legacy of work and service to our town," Prior said. "We owe John for all the things he did and we continue to reap the benefits of his service."

Both Sen. Jason Lewis and Rep. Michael Day also remembered Sullivan fondly. Both said they made their "pilgrimage" to see Sullivan when they ran for public office.

"When I called him, he said, 'What do you want to talk to me for? I'm done,'" Day recalled. "But he said, 'If you win, do good.' He embodied that.'"

Lewis said he would often speak to Sullivan when he was in town.

"I would drop into his office and talk to him about the town, get his advice and perspective," Lewis said. "I really appreciated that."

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Winchester residents, family members, friends and officials who worked with or knew John J. Sullivan gather near Town Hall on Oct. 23 for a dedication ceremony in his honor. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY

Lewis said people don't often realize how much time volunteers, such as those who help run Winchester's boards and commissions, give up away from their friends, families and other aspects of their lives.

"I credit people like John," he said. "I thank John's friends and family for all the hours he spent giving to the community."

Both Lewis and Day presented Sullivan's family with citations from the State House, recognizing him for his "unparallelled service" to Winchester.

Robert Hickey, former chair of Winchester Cooperative Bank, also spoke of his friend. He said Sullivan was someone who was always doing what he felt was right and it wasn't uncommon for him to do those things without looking for recognition.

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"John was always open and he never compromised," Hickey said. "He always wanted to be helpful."

In closing Wednesday's ceremony, von Mering thanked Sullivan's family for all the time they gave up away from their loved one.

"Thank you for sharing him," she told the family. "His positive influence to the town will always be."

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By Talia Ho | Correspondent Fame. Fortune. And all that jazz. This spring, Winchester

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